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SUBJECT: SULTANBEYLI: A HIGHWAY RUNS THROUGH IT... AND
DOESN'T STOP

1. (SBU) Summary and Comment: A recent visit to Sultanbeyli, one of Istanbul's poorer Asian districts, highlights how Turkey's uneven economic gains in recent years have widened the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots." The modern Istanbul-Ankara highway runs right through this conservative, pious neighborhood, but with the nearest exit/on-ramp 15 minutes away, Sultanbeyli residents are reminded that theirs is a less privileged district. Voters here have turned out in large numbers to support successive Islam-oriented parties and gave the Justice and Development (AK) Party over 53 percent of the local vote in 2002 national elections. Although support for AK currently remains strong, success in future elections will also depend on whether the AK government can deliver a locally popular property-registration amnesty and long-term economic development and opportunities. End Summary and Comment.

2. (SBU) Less than thirty years ago, Sultanbeyli was a sparsely populated rural area inland from the Bosphorus and the Gulf of Izmit. Massive immigration from Erzurum, Sivas, and the Black Sea region made this one of the fastest-growing districts in the country. It was also widely known as one of the most conservative and religious districts of Istanbul by the mid-1990s. Since becoming a district (ilce) in 1989, the mayoralty has been held by Islamic-oriented Welfare (Refah), Fazilet (Virtue), and Saadet (Felicity) party candidates. Local residents confirm that as recently as five years ago, a large percentage of the women wore not just headscarves, but the full carsaf (chador). The appointment of a dynamic district governor and the increasingly pragmatic approach of the mayor marked a shift that gave the district a more moderate feel. However, in the main, Sultanbeyli residents remain conservative. The imam at one of the town's largest mosques claimed that the local mosques attract sizable crowds for daily prayers and overflow with faithful on Fridays, although it was impossible for us to have a free conversation with him since the district mufti (representative of the state's religious affairs directorate) showed up to monitor the imam and dominate the conversation.

3. (SBU) Saadet Party Mayor Yahya Karakaya told poloffs that the population growth had exceeded the district's ability to extend municipal services. Although immigration and growth have tapered off, his principal challenges as mayor are to expand the basic water, natural gas, and road infrastructure to the full population. Additionally, up to 75 percent of Sultanbeyli residents lack building authorization and property deeds, leading them to complain that they have no protection or guarantees that they won't be evicted and/or have their property confiscated. Although there is some local industry, Karakaya said, it does not go far in providing local employment opportunities. Unemployment is high and is demonstrated by the fact that some of the 30,000 unemployed line up daily along the main street hoping to find day jobs with contractors looking for cheap labor. Most of those lucky enough to have full-time jobs must board buses each morning for the hour-long journey to Mediyekoy, Sisli, and other Istanbul European districts.

4. (SBU) Local politicians from several parties told visiting poloffs that Sultanbeyli is a Justice and Development (AK) Party stronghold. Although the mayor is from rival Necmettin Erbakan's Saadet Party, he, too, professed a deep admiration for AKP Chairman Tayyip Erdogan and open support for the AK government's policies because he sees them as reasonable, not radical. In the November 2002 elections, 53 percent of Sultanbeyli voters turned out to support AK, compared to only 37 percent in Istanbul as a whole. Although no specific AKP candidate has emerged, newly-elected local AK Party Chairman Omer Ozkartal told poloffs that he expects the party to get as much as 60 percent or more of the vote in the spring 2004 municipal elections. Local Republican People's Party (CHP) officials made no effort to dismiss such claims. In a sign that he doesn't take such support for granted, however, Ozkartal was quick to echo the mayor's call regarding the need to push forward with a property amnesty and to note that as long as the Istanbul-Ankara highway that bisects their

neighborhood merely passes them by, Sultanbeyli residents will not be satisfied.

15. (SBU) Staunchly "secularist" CHP reps acknowledged that Sultanbeyli has moderated considerably from what they described as an oppressively Islamist atmosphere until several years ago. More interested in a real exchange of views with us than the more openly anti-American local CHP organizations in other parts of the country, the reps nevertheless displayed a strong conspiracy-theory approach in peppering us with questions about U.S. intentions.

16. (SBU) The district chairman of Motorola deadbeat Cem Uzan's Genc Party acknowledged that Genc would not win the mayoral elections on its own, but might have a chance if it combined with other parties under a unified candidate. With a portrait of Uzan, considered by a majority of Turks as corruption personified, on the wall behind him, he went on to criticize the widespread nature of corruption in Turkey.
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